Making Airports Safer

Mike Honda introduces bill to improve security through technology

By Ji Hyun Lim


Above: Mike Honda. File photo

Just days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Reps. Mike Honda, D-Calif., and Jim Matheson, D-Utah, set up a closed door meeting with top Silicon Valley executives, the FAA, FBI and Bay Area Airport officials to discuss tech-driven solutions to emerging national aviation security needs.

Subsequent meetings led to legislation that proposes new standards for the government's use of biometric technologies to identify personnel and passengers in airports.

"The attacks of Sept. 11 demand that Congress act decisively to cut through red tape and foster a direct dialogue between high-tech companies and government agencies," Honda said.

Honda, a member of the Aviation Subcommittee who represents Silicon Valley, pointed out that technology would be the most effective and efficient way to identify airport personnel and passengers. With the passage of the bill, Honda expects speedier processes at airports by eliminating antiquated metal detectors, scanners on tarmacs, and inefficient hand searches, and replacing them with high-tech solutions.

In the near future, individuals will be identified based on unique physiological data such as fingerprint authentication, face, hand and voice recognition, as well as retinal scanning, Honda said. Moreover, biometrics is racially neutral and prevents law enforcement from profiling any racial group — a feature that many lawmakers find appealing, said Honda's spokesperson, Ernest

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Baynard.

Honda demonstrated how the technology would work at a forum on Oct. 18 for members of Congress, their staffers and Silicon Valley companies, such as Identix, which researches palm recognition, and Vocent, which develops voice recognition. The purpose of the simulation was to test and evaluate security technology. The new devices would aid in passenger identification for check-in and baggage control, and access control to closed areas. Other devices would help identify suspected terrorists.

Most of the instruments are portable and easily implemented. Voice recognition only requires a phone line that dials into a server and relays information to a laptop. An individual is asked to count backward from 10 to one and the instrument analyzes the voice. The retinal scanner, intended for airport personnel only, flashes a beam of light in the eye and instantly retrieves information on the person's identity. Hand-printing, which is an instrument that has been around for 20 years, detects the hand's characteristics through sensors. Smart cards would also identify personnel and passengers by retrieving an individual's picture and relaying critical information.

"They're not James Bond-type technology," Baynard said. "This is technology that already exists, is feasible and workable."

The Honda/Matheson bill proposes a pilot program that would cost $50 million to implement. The security devices would be stationed in 20 national airports and tested in real life settings. Technology would be placed in airports for less than 90 days in some cases. The bill calls for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to perform these field tests. After one year, the FAA would submit to Congress a report on the results of these pilot programs, their feasibility, costs, benefits and effectiveness.

Already, the Federal government plans to bolster spending for airport security in light of the Sept. 11 attacks.

"The Federal government has a dramatically changing landscape when it comes to the amount of money it's going to put into airport security," Baynard said. "[Inevitably, they will] increase federal investment in airport security."

"The purpose of the bill is to update standards and streamline airport security processes. The government and airline should have the best possible tools to make sure people are safe."

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